New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

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1955 PRODUCTIONS

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Plain and Fancy"

Daily Mirror

January 28, 1955

'Plain and Fancy' a Sure Hit at Hellinger

By ROBERT COLEMAN

If you are looking for adventure off the beaten track, why not spend an evening with the picturesque Amish down Pennsylvania way? Richard Kollmar and James W. Gardiner, in association with Yvette Schumer, have arranged a delightful tour of the countryside via "Plain and Fancy."

YOU WON'T HAVE to worry about gassing up your car, looking up bus or train schedules. Instead, you can sit in one of the Mark Hellinger's comfortable seats and have a wonderful time. Right on Broadway. For the new arrival is a completely captivating musical hit.

In "Plain and Fancy," a couple of New York sophisticates go to a simple Amish community near Lancaster to sell a farm. They run into enough ritual, romance and excitement to fill a couple of ordinary song-and-dancers. The fancy folk learn a lot from the plain people, and vice versa.

You may have seen some of the Amish, with their buttonless clothes, flat hats and chin whiskers. They are a serious people, with a rigid code. They are also a contented lot, and are among the most efficient and prosperous farmers in America. They lavish the color that they deny their persons on their bulging barns.

NOW, DON'T GET the idea that "Plain and Fancy" is a dour show because it's about the stern Amish. It is hilarious and human. There's a bustling dinner scene, a barn burning and raising, a red-hot carnival sequence and other mouth-watering and eye-filling events.

Kollmar, Gardiner and Schumer have assembled a perfect cast for director Morton Da Costa, and choreographer Helen Tamiris to work with. Shirl Conway, as a breezy wisecracker from Manhattan, has a field day with the Joseph Stein and Will Glickman patter. She also has a whale of a time with clever Arnold Horwitt lyrics, set to tuneful Albert Hague music. She's terrific.

"PLAIN AND FANCY"

Musical comedy with book by Joseph Stein and Will Glickman; lyrics by Arnold B. Horwitt; music by Albert Hague; staged by Morton Da Costa; dances and musical numbers staged by Helen Tamiris; sets and costumes by Raoul Pene duBois; lighting by Peggy Clark; orchestrations by Philip J. Lang; presented by Richard Kollmar and James W. Gardiner in association with Yvette Schumer at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, January 27, 1955. The cast:

Ruth Winters.....Shirl Conway
Dan King.....Richard Derr
A Man.....John Dennis
Another Man....Chris Robinson
Katie Yoder....Gloria Marlowe
Papa Yoder.....Stefan Schnabel
Isaac Miller.....Sammy Smith
Emma Miller....Nancy Andrews
Ezra Reber.....
Douglas Fletcher Rodgers

Hilda Miller.....Barbara Cook
A Young Miller....Scotty Engel
Another Young Miller..Elaine Lynn

Peter Reber.....David Daniels
Rachel.....Ethel May Cody
Samuel Zook.....Daniel Nagrin
Levi Stolfus.....William Weslow

Jacob Yoder.....Will Able
Samuel Lapp....Chris Robinson
Abner Zook....Edgar Thompson
Ike Pilersheim..James S. Moore

Moses Zook.....John Dennis
Abner Zook....Tim Worthington
An Amishman...Herbert Surface
Another Amishman.....
Robert Lindgren

Bessie.....Faith Daltry
Sarah.....Renee Orin
Esther.....Sybil Lamb

Rebecca.....Betty McGuire
Mary.....Muriel Shaw
State Trooper.....Ray Hyson

Richard Derr is excellent as her amiable companion. Barbara Cook is a real doll as an Amish lass who develops a fondness for big city ways. Daniel Nagrin heads the show-stopping dance corps. And bows from the waist are due Gloria Marlowe, Stefan Schnabel, David Daniels, Douglas Fletcher Rodgers, Sammy Smith and Nancy Andrews.

RAOUL PENE DU BOIS has designed evocatively atmospheric settings and costumes, while Franz Allers is admirable on the orchestral podium.

"Plain and Fancy," in our book, is one of the most original musicals to hit the Main Stem in many a semester. It has everything — the best of everything. But if you expect to see it soon, you'd better rush to the Mark Hellinger Theatre immediately. For tickets are going to be as hard to obtain as Greta Garbo's acting talents. We loved every minute of it.

DAILY NEWS

January 28, 1955

'Plain & Fancy' Engaging Musical About Pennsylvania Dutch Folks

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The new musical at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, "Plain and Fancy," is an engaging, intelligent and handsome affair set in an interesting locale—the country of the Plain People in Lancaster County, Pa. It is acted, danced and sung by a very attractive and well-directed company, and so much of it is top-grade that it deserves to be on Broadway for quite a piece of time. My one doubt concerning it is about the music. The songs are pleasant enough generally, and one or two of them have special zest, but at the opening last evening I kept wishing that the orchestra and singers would stop plodding and take off on a really rousing number. Richard Rodgers should have written the tunes.

On any road map, the setting of "Plain and Fancy" is the hamlet of Bird in Hand, Pa. At the theatre, the setting is pure Raoul Pene du Bois—and it is du Bois at his best as a scenic artist. It is never gaudy, never overwhelming, but always a lovely picture of the rich farming land and sturdy houses and barns which the Amish people possess. With a series of traveler curtains, extraordinarily well-painted drops and a number of ingeniously contrived full sets, it is a mechanical masterpiece in addition to being admirable scenic art. One setting, in which an entire big barn is raised on the stage in less than five minutes, is spectacular.

Happily Chosen Company

The story of "Plain and Fancy" is more plain than fancy, as it should be. It concerns a young New Yorker and his sophisticated girl friend who drive down into the Amish country to sell a piece of property he has inherited but doesn't know about. In this neighborhood of Bird in Hand they find themselves out of this metropolitan world, in a land of quaint customs, stern morals and Weber & Fields English. They run across a romance or two among the young generation of Amishers, and manage to fix things up so that everybody is in love with the right party at the end—which is how any sensible musical should end.

The actors are most engaging. I was particularly happy when watching Shirl Conway in the part of the smart New York gal. Besides being very attractive, she is a skillful comedienne, and the most amusing scene in the show is where she volunteers to work in a Pennsylvania Dutch kitchen and gets herself all mixed up with a water pump, a butter churn and an overloaded pot of boiling rice.

Good Book and Lyrics

Very pleasant, too, is Richard Derr as Miss Conway's big-town companion. And among the Amish folk there are excellent performances by Gloria Marlowe, Stefan Schnabel, Nancy Andrews, Barbara Cook, David Daniels and others. A couple of dance numbers staged by Helen Tamiris are exceptionally picturesque and stylish, and one dancer, Daniel Nagrin, is remarkable.

I like the book of "Plain and Fancy" which Joseph Stein and Will Glickman have written, for it treats the Amish people as the real people they are and manages to find humor in their odd folkways and curious dialect without ever poking fun at them. I like also the lyrics by Arnold B. Horwitt, and the skillful direction of a big company in many scenes by Morton Da Costa. But I can be no better than lukewarm about the melodies by Albert Hague and the orchestrations by Philip J. Lang.

The New York Times
January 28, 1955

Theatre: Amish Musical

'Plain and Fancy' Bows at Mark Hellinger

By BROOKS ATKINSON

BY mixing Amish people with regulation showmanship, the producers of "Plain and Fancy," which opened at the Mark Hellinger Thursday evening, have emerged with an interesting if uneven musical comedy.

Probably we should not be too exacting. For the Amish aspects of "Plain and Fancy" are beautiful and affecting. Joseph Stein and Will Glickman, the authors, treat these Pennsylvania farm folks with respect, and Albert Hague, the composer, has written some charming music for them, with suitable lyrics by Arnold B. Horwitt.

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Don't expect a sociological study of the Amish. But within the terms of musical comedy, "Plain and Fancy" presents them as admirable people. Behind their severity there is a solid culture that produces happiness as well as abundance. By introducing a couple of worldly New Yorkers into an Amish community, the authors make some humorous contrasts, particularly since Shirl Conway plays their sophisticated city girl in a vastly amusing dead-pan style.

But that is not their principal motive. When it is introducing the audience to Amish people, the first act includes a lot of fresh and disarming material—shyness giving way to hospitality, the closeness of community life, the customs of betrothal and marriage, the opulence of the fields, the discipline of "shunning" persons who have offended the community. Mr. Hague's most stirring song is a powerful, uncompromising declaration of Amish principles—"Plain We Live," sung with great conviction by Stefan Schnabel and a chorus of farmers.

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With such genuine characters as the substance of the show, can't the authors find anything better for a second act than the old staples of Broadway? Showmanship will be the death of show business yet. After the first act, "Plain and Fancy" reverts to type—the standard drunk scene, the tawdry glamour of a carnival where sex and sin create quite a disturbance. Thanks to Helen Tamiris, who has composed the choreography, and to Daniel Nagrin, who is a gifted dancer, the carnival scene is interesting. But the strange beauty of the Amish life is diluted with more familiar Broadway beverages, and "Plain and Fancy" fritters away the finest folk material of the season.

Probably that is counsel of perfection. For there is a lot of excellent stuff in the show—two lovely Amish girls played by Gloria Marlowe and Barbara Cook, dressed in plain clothes that are nevertheless enchanting; a city visitor played with sympathy and good taste by Richard Derr; a farm matron played with genial heartiness by Nancy Andrews; a lovesick Amish boy played romantically by David Daniels, and a friendly cabbage-cutter played well by Douglas Fletcher Rodgers.

Mr. Hague has written a remarkably pleasant score of romantic melodies, like the wistful "It Wonders Me" and the pleading "Young and Foolish"; a joyous piece entitled "How Do You Raise a Barn?"; an entertaining fable called "City Mouse, Country Mouse," and a wryly comic comment labeled "It's a Helluva Way to Run a Love Affair."

Confronted with the task of making theatrical backgrounds out of an Amish environment, Raoul Pène du Bois is a little inhibited. He is better with Toulouse-Lautrec themes than with Grant Wood. In fact, the subject of the Amish is one that Broadway has not really mastered in "Plain and Fancy." The authors have not sustained the grave beauty of a notable first act. Their hearts belong to Broadway.

New York Herald Tribune
January 28, 1955

THEATER

'Plain and Fancy'

By WALTER F. KERR

Pleasant, Ain't?

THERE comes a moment in "Plain and Fancy," the Hellinger's neat and tidy new musical, when a pert little Amish girl starts to rip off her Pennsylvania bonnet, apron and full-length skirt. Trying on a pair of bright red shoes, and draping an unfamiliar fur piece rakishly from her shoulder, she heads for splendor and scandal at a 'city-folk' carnival. That little Amish girl is making a mistake.

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Far and away the most charming things in the unpretentious lark that Richard Kollmar and James W. Gardiner have rustled into town are the casual countryside didoes. "Plain and Fancy" is peopled with those picture-book farm folk who haven't changed a habit in two hundred years, who haven't quite got around to using any buttons beneath those flourishing beards, and who are firmly convinced that "a man who whistles has an empty head."

This somewhat unmusical attitude hasn't kept composer Albert Hague from brightening up the landscape with reasonably lively rhythms, or authors Joseph Stein and Will Glickman from going flippant now and then. But the authors, sophisticates though they undoubtedly are, have shown a genial respect for their sampler-style rustics, and the Broadwayese has been kept to a minimum.

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There's a promising first glimpse of a pretty, demure heroine (Gloria Marlowe) and her frosty patriarch of a father (Stefan Schnabel) clopping chastely home in a last-century carriage. There's a fine old russet-colored tableau, probably composed by choreographer Helen Tamiris, as a burst of sunlight discloses the boys and girls of Bird-in-Hand, Pennsylvania, glowing with pride over their tub of apple-butter. There's an attractively quaint plot development as a rejected suitor paints a last farewell to his love—it happens to take the form of a childlike bluebird with both eyes on one side of its head—on the family barn. And for something of a more rousing order, a stageful of willing hands toss a brand new barn together in a couple of racing, musical minutes. It all goes to show you what good fresh air, clean living, and no smoking can do.

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I suppose there are limits to the gaiety that so simple and sober a background can provide, and it's got to be mentioned that "Plain and Fancy" has its really plain patches. The verbal humor gets a little parched under all that sun now and then, the lyrics are better when they are being earnestly romantic than when they try for show-stopping gags (not often), and a world in which there are "no complicated gadgets in the kitchen, no complicated notions in the head" does tend to get a little thinnish before it finally, and wistfully, fades from view.

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But there is good, solid breakfast-food—with cream on it—along the way. David Daniels, as a young "troublemaker," and Gloria Marlowe, as the girl he can't have, turn the simple love story into a genuinely affecting one. Shirl Conway, as a city-girl reduced to sneaking a cigarette in a slanting attic, makes hearty capital out of a kitchen sequence in which she churns butter with one hand, pumps water with another and watches the rice boil over in horrified dismay. She's entertaining, too, as she deals with a breadline of "wonderful nice fellows" in broad-brimmed hats who have come to stare at her assorted charms. Barbara Cook, right off a blue and white Dutch plate, is delicious all the time, but especially when she perches on a trunk, savors her first worthwhile kiss and melts into the melody of "This is all so new to me."

• • •

A dance sequence in which the couples of the village hunt each other out by lantern light is beautifully staged by Miss Tamiris and danced with exhilarating style by Daniel Nagrin. Nancy Andrews makes a tongue-in-check number called "City Mouse, Country Mouse" soar over the footlights, and Richard Derr ambles amiably over the terrain as a New Yorker who's inherited some Amish land. Finally, there's nothing more winning about a decently friendly evening than Raoul Pene du Bois' handsome landscapes and tastefully shining costumes.

"Plain and Fancy" is sweet, attractive, and normal as blueberry pie.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 28, 1955

'Plain and Fancy' Fresh and Gay

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Plain and Fancy," the town's new musical, is fresh as new-mown hay, bubbly as hard cider and pretty as a bride's smile. It's at the Mark Hellinger.

The gaiety takes place in Pennsylvania's Amish country. A couple of sophisticated New Yorkers bust in on the strict and solemn plain living of these devout folk. The fancy city pair stirs up trouble and helps straighten it out. The farming fellows and girls take a new lease on living.

Nobody thinks much of love as a reason to marry before the strangers arrive. Several fights and a fire later, an unloved fiance has learned about firewater and low-down carnivals.

Heart Goes Free.

His debauchery sets his intended free for the boy she loves. And even the city fellow's heart wakes up.

There is practically nobody involved in this breezy, dynamic show who does not deserve a big hand. Outstanding credit goes to Barbara Cook, who flings her own heart over the footlights with whatever she does, and sings and dances her way into the hearts of the audience.

Shirl Conway has a main line of comedy to carry as a stubborn Manhattanite pursuing the light of her eye into Amish country where he has inherited a farm. She is a big, gorgeous blonde who belts out a song or a wisecrack with equally hearty vigor.

Richard Derr has the Arrow collar look and the agreeable way of seeming unaware of his attractiveness that allows him to be chased by the girls to their hearts' content without looking silly.

Nancy Andrews lustily hymns the glories of the simple life with a grin beyond compare. Gloria Marlowe and David Daniels play the unhappy young lovers, who sing themselves together in the end.

Bouncey Ballets.

Daniel Nagrin proves once more that he is an extraordinarily strong and light dancer, the rare one who can stop a show, here in Helen Tamiris' bouncey, fervent ballets.

Douglas Fletcher Rodgers is outstanding as a goofy investigator of Vat 69's delights, and Stefan Schnabel spreads a sinister light over the show as the stern Amish father.

There are ballads that may soar to the hit list, "Young and Foolish" and "Follow Your Heart." Several of the other songs are certainly bright enough to last.

"Plain and Fancy" is a beautiful show to watch, warm and rich with the colors of abundant countryside, pastel with the simple clothes of the plain people, then livid and murky at the carnival. Raoul Pene Dubois has done a memorable job with his palette.

All in all, I think you'd better plan to see it. "Plain and Fancy" makes you feel as if you had on new shoes and your best hat.

Journal American

January 28, 1955

Lively and Lavish Comedy

Kollmar-Gardiner Show Due To Be With Us Quite a Spell

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE QUEST for quaint locales for musicals has led various producers to Scotland, the South Pacific, Mount Olympus, Paris, Oklahoma and Baghdad, to name a few. Thus faced with a shrinking geographical problem producers Richard Kollmar and James W. Gardiner last night took us to Bird-In-Hand, Pa., the home grounds for the Amish Sect, through the medium of a lively and lavish song-and-dancer called "Plain and Fancy." This was unveiled at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, and if my guess is good it will be around for quite a spell.

The Amish are a dour and ascetic breed, denying themselves even the simple convenience of buttons, so when we find a bright young New Yorker and his girl friend descending upon them there is ample opportunity for fun.

Much of this falls into the cliche contrast of their colloquial speech and manners and the sophisticated approach of the city folk. But Joseph Stein and Will Glickman, the authors, and Arnold Horwitt and Albert Hague, who fashioned the lyrics and music have managed to invest the progeedings with considerable unostentatious charm. None of my best friends are Ams, but that's regrettable—I think I'd like them.

What actually happens to Richard Derr and Shirl Conway, the fugitives from Manhattan, is relatively unimportant. He has inherited a farm in the Amish country and has come down to see about a sale; when he finds that it is about to be bought by a stern father who is marrying off his daughter to the wrong suitor, he takes matters into his own hands.

This is enough plot structure to provide proper atmosphere and Raoul Pene du Bois has done wonders with a series of cross-sections, sliding curtains and drops which reveal the intimate and external life of the community. There would seem to be several songs which will be heard henceforth with regularity: "Young and Foolish," "Plain We Live" (a truly compelling hymn) and "Follow Your Heart," to name the obvious. There is an exceptional specialty, "By Lantern Light" danced by Daniel Nagrin, Ann Needham and others; a good comedy number, "It's a Helluva Way to Run a Love Affair," by Shirl Conway, and several engaging contributions by Barbara Cook, David Daniels, Gloria Marlowe, and Douglas Fletcher Rodgers. Helen Tamiris deserves a special nod for the choreography, especially the Carnival Ballet in the second act.

"Plain and Fancy" brings us lots of new people in a fresh environment. It is tuneful and sprightly and everybody seems to be having a good time. Including the audience.

New York Post

January 28, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Very Engaging Musical Comedy

The brightness of the theatrical season is vastly enhanced by the arrival of a particularly engaging new musical comedy called "Plain and Fancy." By the pleasant device of bringing a pair of amiable Broadwayites into contact with the members of the stern Amish sect of the Pennsylvania Dutch, some talented show people have found an admirable framework for a new girl-and-music entertainment that has gayety, imagination, freshness, tunefulness, good dancing and all the other ingredients of an expectionally beguiling evening in the theater.

At the Mark Hellinger last night, where "Plain and Fancy" had its first local performance, there was such a receptive audience present that it even applauded loudly a map of Pennsylvania that served as curtain before the opening scene. I suspect that such hasty ecstacy has a way of making reviewers suspicious, but, happily, the applause was justified by subsequent events. For the new show was quickly revealed as possessing the sort of brilliant theatrical skill that has given the popular American musical theater its justified fame and fortune.

Good Companions

It is my guess that, in actuality, I would find the grim, puritan and primitive Amish extremely depressing company. Thanks, however, to the creative imagination of "Plain and Fancy," they not only provide fresh and unspoiled material for a librettist but become remarkably entertaining companions for an evening of brightness, melody and charm. The book by Joseph Stein and Will Glickman has the good sense to make both the visiting New Yorkers and the resident Amish believeable human beings and not comic grotesques, yet maintain its sense of humor.

The trouble with writing about a show like "Plain and Fancy" is that it is difficult to keep the review from becoming a mere catalogue of credits. Having warned you on the peril, I'll proceed to demonstrate it. The narrative is agreeably sensible, and the incidental romance between an Amish maiden and her rebellious childhood sweetheart even possesses a bit of tenderness. Albert Hague's music and Arnold B. Horwitt's lyrics may or may not provide a large quota of song hits, but they have the freshness, charm and brightness of the rest of the show.

Other Merits

There isn't a great deal of dancing, but what there is proves to be excellent, blending strikingly with the mood of the show, providing humor and, to use that word again, freshness, and offering an exceptional performer in the person of Daniel Nagrin. Raoul Pene DuBois' costumes and settings are colorful without losing the correct spirit, and I didn't even mind the fact that a barn is rebuilt on the stage in a manner perhaps a trifle too reminiscent of the rebuilding of the teahouse in "The Teahouse of the August Moon." And the chorus can sing.

I liked everyone in the cast, which is something I can't always say about musical comedies. The New Yorkers are pleasantly played by Richard Derr and Shirl Conway, with Miss Conway proving to be that rarity, an actress who can be comic without losing her attractiveness. Among the Amish, Gloria Marlowe is appealing as the romantic maiden, Barbara Cook is most engaging as the humorous one, David Daniels acts and sings the role of the young lover admirably, and Stefan Schnabel and Douglas Fletcher Rodgers give a saving humanity to the parts of two of the the less pleasant villagers. It's a pleasure to greet "Plain and Fancy."

"The Grand Prize"

The New York Times

January 27, 1955

Theatre: The Boss Is the Giveaway

TV Stunts Lampooned in 'The Grand Prize'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

RONALD ALEXANDER can write such funny dialogue that he does not like to waste his time putting a play together. His newest play, "The Grand Prize," which opened at the Plymouth Wednesday evening, illustrates his genial and irresponsible point of view.

When he works himself around to discussing the advertising business, he is humorously devastating. "All you need to get along in the advertising business," his junior executive says, "is to have no opinions. But you have got to be definite about them."

Or, take Mr. Alexander on psychoanalysis. His attitude is equally sardonic. For his hero is the case book in reverse. Robert Meredith, the central character in the play, was loved so abundantly as a boy and had such a happy childhood that he is well on toward middle age before he realizes that he is maladjusted.

But don't bore Mr. Alexander with the tiresome details of making a play. "The Grand Prize" is really a farce about a business secretary who wins a television contest, and as a reward becomes her boss' boss for a day. He is Robert Meredith. A thorough professional as a business man, he has been trying to make love to his secretary in and out of business hours.

As soon as "The Grand Prize" has gotten through its preliminary satire of the television trade, it settles down to a two-and-one-half act struggle between the secretary and her boss for a legitimate proposal. The hassle involves an amorous blonde from next door, and the proper advertising man, who drinks his way into a couple of comic scenes.

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As a plot this is more unreliable than most, and inferior to the one Mr. Alexander slapped together for "Time Out for Ginger" in 1952. The actors do rather better at it than he does. Under Shepard Traube's broad and merchantable direction, they make a cheerful romp out of the performance. June Lockhart, as the secretary, is pert, fresh, wholesome and altogether delightful.

By managing to look as like the author as he can and by imitating the author's personal comedy style in conversations, John Newland is consistently amusing as the beleaguered business man. He has the good taste never to approach a subject directly and never to make a simple statement without giving it an impudent twist.

Betsy Palmer, frankly luscious, is the carnivorous blonde; she gives an interesting performance that is easy to understand. As the advertising man befuddled by gin, Tom Poston has two funny scenes. As a television announcer, William Windom represents loathsome unction amusingly. Nancy Wickwire, as a television-commercial star, lacks subtlety, which is probably a professional touch. In these characterizations the author, Mr. Windom and Miss Wickwire have succeeded in defining one of the most vital of the television trade practices: the performers display a monumental lack of interest in anyone else.

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The single setting of an undistinguished New York apartment has been pleasantly designed by Pat Campbell. In fact, everything about "The Grand Prize" is pleasant except the play and story. Mr. Alexander has a bountiful sense of humor and a likable distaste for hokum in advertising, psychoanalysis and television. He is not so scrupulous about hokum in the theatre.

"THE GRAND PRIZE"

Comedy by Ronald Alexander; staged by Shepard Traube; setting and lighting by Pat Campbell; costumes by Virginia Volland; presented by Mr. Traube at the Plymouth Theatre, January 26, 1955. The cast:

George.....Ken Harvey
Lucille Cotton...June Lockhart
John Condon Mitchell.....
William Windom
Brenda Johnson..Nancy Wickwire
Mack.....Perry Bruskin
Kate Wilson.....Betsy Palmer
Robert Meredith...John Newland
Edward Martin.....Tom Poston
Green.....Donald McKee

New York Post

January 27, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Play Partly About Television

Ronald Alexander, author of "Time Out for Ginger," which you may remember, has now written a comedy about a girl secretary who wins a day's control over her handsome boss through a television show. It may supply a gratifying wish-fulfillment for a number of young career women, but, as it was presented last night for the first time at the Plymouth Theater, "The Grand Prize" seemed to me an intermittent and mechanical little antic, brightened by several humorous scenes and attractive performances, yet far from exhilarating as consistent entertainment.

The sort of theatrical trade goods that may conceivably find a not-too-demanding audience, I would be inclined to dismiss it loftily as hardly the kind of play that should be subjected to the cruelty of harsh critical analysis. My temptation is to say I didn't care for it but that many others may disagree with me as heartily as they did when they flocked, or, at least, went to see "Time Out for Ginger," which had an impressive local run. But it does bring up a couple of provocative points, which I'd like to contemplate here.

In the first scene, for example, it poses a question that interested me. Do people need an author's permission to laugh at what they would ordinarily take seriously? "The Grand Prize" begins by making fun of a television commercial. I'm not denying that it is quite funny, too. But, so far as I'm concerned, it's no more extreme or more ridiculous than the actual commercials, which apparently the public takes with notable gravity. I couldn't keep from wondering last night if some of the laughter wasn't more defensive than really scornful of absurdity.

Then, there is the question of whether a good performance can get in a comedy's way. The portrayal of the evening is Tom Poston's shrewd characterization of an inhibited young man liberated by drink. Mr. Poston is nothing short of hilarious, but he is also playing the fellow who loses the girl to the dashing boss. And, since he made the alcoholic youth by far the most engaging figure in the play, it comes as an unhappy ending when the self-satisfied hero gets the heroine. Is it possible that "The Grand Prize" is thus injured by too attractive a portrayal?

Passing hastily over such an ungrateful query, I'll go on to report that Mr. Alexander's comedy, after starting as if it were going to make fun of television, pretty much drops the subject to tell of the romance between the secretary and the boss. There are several amusing scenes, chiefly those in which Mr. Poston appears, but it all seems stretched out pretty tenuously, and there is always the feeling that the play could have come to an end far more quickly if the two central figures had stopped stalling and done what they obviously wanted to do.

June Lockhart, an attractive young actress with a graceful comedy touch, plays the girl secretary with her customary charm and skill. Betsy Palmer, another attractive player, struck me as too handsome to be enacting the role of a young woman forced to throw herself at men, but she handles the part agreeably, while Nancy Wickwire, who recently made a hit at the Cherry Lane in "The Way of the World," is good in her one scene as the girl who does the commercials. It probably isn't John Newland's fault that he makes the boss appear awfully pleased with himself. I can't be enthusiastic about "The Grand Prize."

Journal American

January 27, 1955

Certain to Be a Winner

June Lockhart Is Beguiling

By JOHN McCLAIN

RONALD ALEXANDER is a playwright who has enjoyed a signal success parlaying a small, durable idea through an evening. A couple of seasons ago he gave us "Time Out for Ginger," an exercise based on the conception that the teen-age daughter of a respectable family had become the star halfback on her high school football team. The show played through an entire season on Broadway and is even now providing Melvyn Douglas, the perennial star, with a quiet annuity as he performs it in Australia.

Last night Mr. Alexander, aided by Shepard Traube once more as producer-director, brought a successor, "The Grand Prize," to the Plymouth Theatre. Again the effort is thin, it is ridden with many a reminiscent situation and line, but I think it's a winner. The world may not hail the author as the brimming genius of his time, but he won't care. He'll make a lot of money.

Single Idea

As in his first effort, Alexander has seized upon a single idea and carried it from there. Now it is a TV program; the lucky girl who wins the prize is "Boss For A Day." Thus June Lockhart, a secretary, becomes the boss of John Newland, her bachelor boss.

I need scarcely tell you that this provokes her to turn the tables, to reduce him to the most menial tasks. It is equally superfluous to add that she falls in love with him.

What saves the whole evening from a quagmire of platitudes are the entirely beguiling performances of Miss Lockhart and Tom Poston. Miss Lockhart exudes a wonderfully ingenuous charm and Mr. Poston gives us the best drunk scenes in a season in which practically everybody on-stage has essayed one or more, with varying success. This is by far the best such written and acted.

General Hilarity

Another important contributor to the general hilarity is Betsy Palmer, a newcomer, who is able to remain amusing despite the fact that she is cast in the unbelievable role of a ravishing blonde whose charms are unappreciated by everybody—but the audience. I was a bachelor in this town for many years and it was my experience that the Miss Palmers of our time were not suffering from unrequited love. They were all at El Morocco with millionaires.

John Newland, who plays the boss, has a fairly thankless part and did not strike me as being as devastating as the situations in the show suggest. Maybe I'm just a little tired of those scenes in which somebody like Marilyn Monroe tries to sit on a young man's lap and the young man will have no part of it.

Despite all this there is no question that the author can write many a funny line, and that the audience enjoyed it. "The Grand Prize" gives us an amiable and unpretentious evening, good for a long haul.

A Dependable, Accurate Source of Information of the American Theatre

NEW YORK

THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 27, 1955

'The Grand Prize' Offered at Plymouth

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There is no modern subject for theatrical comedy with which more people can readily associate their own feelings than television.

Everybody knows it, and most people love it and hate it in equal parts, but decided conviction. Witness the joy of audiences when the hero of "Anniversary Waltz" puts his foot through the talking screen.

Here in "The Grand Prize" at the Plymouth, we start out kidding around about TV. The heroine is victor on a show called Boss for a Day. She gets to make a hireling bent to her own will, out of her employer.

While it is spoofing giveaways, and the voracious insincerity of announcers, "The Grand Prize" is a very funny play.

Bumpy Humor.

Once it foregoes the automatic stereopticon, the play's humor gets bumpy and irregular. Oddly enough, romance proves much less amusing than television, as a subject for satire and kidding.

One big reason for this is that the show's eventual aim is too long concealed. When it comes out into the open that girl must get boy, we have already accepted them in unromantic relationship. The love affair seems trumped up ever after.

Its development is simply not very interesting. The scenes are too long, and the speeches too short. The resultant rhythm grows monotonous.

The principal characters are not awfully original. So the lead players suffer from seeing the play stolen from under their noses by excellent assistants.

Amusing Primness.

June Lockhart is amusing and honest as the prim contest winner. As her boss, John Newland will be attractively effective enough when he stops grinning at his own lines. It is neither's fault that you just do not care about the characters they play.

On the other hand, I have rarely heard such a thunder of applause as accompanied two exits of Tom Posten. It is the actor's first real opportunity around here, and he ought never to be out of work again.

He plays a young advertising executive, engaged to Miss Lockhart at the start. Drunkenly, hilariously, he disengages both of them toward the finish. His two big scenes are practically monologues. They are real joys.

Good Humored.

Betsy Palmer is a delectable blond who overcomes a single-tracked character, by simply being engagng and good humored. Her lines are all jocular invitations to l'amour. Maybe it is just her looks and nature that makes it seem she gives them great variety.

William Windom is horrendously effective as a grinning, self-assured TV announcer. His affection and ego add up to a grim cartoon.

Similarly Nancy Wickwire makes a satirical jewel of her role as one of those iron hard, toothy reciters of gooey TV commercials.

DAILY NEWS

January 27, 1955

'Grand Prize' a Pleasant Comedy About TV, Advertising and Sex

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Grand Prize," which Shepard Traube put on at the Plymouth theatre last evening, is a cheerful comedy—and that's something, for so many comedies are not. It also is amiable—and that is something, too. And, although its manner is deliberately unsophisticated most of the time, it does manage to land several swift jabs on the wide-open chins of the TV and advertising businesses.

Many a playwright has tried to get funny about radio and there may have been one or two assaults on television. Advertising has been a sitting duck for sharpshooting dramatists for generations, but nobody has ever hit the target dead center. Ronald Alexander, the author of "The Grand Prize"—and the author of "Time Out for Ginger," which ran here for a year after I had disapproved of it—is playing a cagey game in this new piece. He gets smart and funny only once in a while, and the rest of the time he concentrates on a simple romance between a secretary and her boss. There is nothing so satisfying as simple romance in the world of fiction because there is so little ot it in the real world.

Girl Wins, Natch

Alexander starts off his story with a TV broadcast from the one-room apartment of a bachelor girl. If she endorses the right products and answers a few questions put by a master of ceremonies whose function is unction, she gets to be Boss for the Day. For 24 hours she can boss her boss, who is, of course, attractive, wealthy and on the make. You'd know how it will turn out with one ear tied behind you, of course. She subjugates the boss and gets him on her own maidenly terms, which are marriage.

The television stuff in the first act is quite jolly what with the realistic maneuverings of a real camera, the happy patter of a little mind as the master of ceremonies goes to work, the compelling commercials delivered by a frightening female and the bewildered antics of the secretary as her little home is invaded.

But one act of this is enough, and this is just where Alexander drops it. He spends the rest of the time speculating on which boy is going to win the girl and which is going to lose her. I don't think the ending of his comedy surprised him any more than it did me.

Pleasant Company

There are some very pleasant actors in "The Grand Prize," one being June Lockhart, who seems to be about as sweet, wholesome and forthright as young leading ladies come. Another is John Newland, as a sophisticated boss who manages to remain likeable. A third is Tom Poston as the solemn advertising man who is the other contender for Miss Lockhart's affections.

Poston has the best drunk scene since Elliott Nugent, playing another solemn fellow, got stewed in the first production of "The Male Animal"—and he acts it in much the same way. He also has one glorious line which must sum up all admen's disaffection for their business, when he wails, "I'm tired of wearing Brooks Brothers suits!"

There are some pleasant acting assists from Nancy Wickwire, Betsy Palmer, William Windom and others, and all in all "The Grand Prize" is a pleasant affair.